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SOME UNCONSIDERED ELEMENTS IN HOUSEHOLD EXPENDITURE

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Now that the theorists have effectively laid at rest the ghost of the economic man, there seems to be danger that the cost-of-living statisticians will create a new bogey, that of the economic woman; the woman who, without waste or extravagance, can on 22 cents per man per day for food, and 400 cubic feet of air space per adult, create a real home life and preserve the physical efficiency of her family.

Grasping eagerly at the first signs of a scientific or at least an arithmetical standard of living, we often fail to give due consideration to the personal and psychological elements that influence expenditure. Many factors interfere with the carrying out in life of any such limited definite scheme of living. In attempting to formulate any standard out of the wide variations revealed in individual family budgets, investigators have willingly accepted definite figures such as Professor Chittenden's formulation of the minimum cost of food. Before we become hypnotized by these figures it seems worth while to consider briefly some factors that appear to require modification of the standards so far worked out. To tie up these considerations to the general subject of discussion, what waste must we assume to be inevitable and especially what extravagance must we consider justified in maintaining merely the physical efficiency of the workers?

Take first the current figures as to the cost of food. In Professor Chittenden's study of Professor Chapin's budgets, we have a painstaking effort to formulate a standard based on the cost of food as purchased by housewives in the open market. His statement has been widely quoted that enough food to provide the requisite number of calories and grams of protein for the adult man at average labor can be purchased for 22 cents per day. The varying amount of food needed by people of different ages has been formulated by Professor Atwater; that a woman needs eight-tenths as much food

as a man, a child of twelve, six-tenths, and so on down till we reach the child of two who needs three-tenths as much. If we do this arithmetic we find that this allows 6.6 cents a day to provide adequate nutrition for a child of two.

The dietaries prepared by Dr. Pezek for the New York milk committee require for a child of two a quart and a half of milk and one egg a day besides bread, cereal, fruit, etc. The milk and egg alone would cost at least 15 cents a day, so that 20 cents is probably the minimum on which reasonable diet could be provided. With all the emphasis laid by infant mortality and tuberculosis prevention campaigns on the absolute necessity of providing proper nourishment adequate to build up the child's power of resistance, we have been solemnly allowing it in our budget studies two glasses of milk and a little bread each day. What is the difficulty?

These ratios are doubtless accurate when applied to the number of calories and grams of protein that the individual needs but do not hold good for the *cost of providing* the required amount of nutrition; they fail to take into consideration the relative strength of the digestive apparatus and the power of assimilation of people of different ages and occupations. A child of two will not flourish on pork and beans, cheap and nourishing though they may be; it needs milk—an easily assimilated but expensive form of food. Here economy in the purchase of food would obviously result in decreased physical efficiency. This conclusion seems elementary but so far, I believe, has not been taken into consideration in building up our figures as to the cost of food?

The same query applies to the lessened per cent allowed for women and those in sedentary occupations. May it not be that these less active people if they are to assimilate the necessary amount of food may have to have more delicate, and this is frequently synonymous with more expensive, food?

Professor Chittenden's experiments as to the actual results of living on certain diets have been made under special circumstances. Before we are in a position to be very emphatic about the cost of nutrition, not of food, further experiments might well be made as to the effect of age and occupation on the power to assimilate different grades of food.

It would also be interesting to know exactly the effect on this power of assimilation of having appetizing as well as nourishing food. I am told by medical men that appetite has a distinct effect on the

flow of gastric juices. Could a person keep well permanently on a diet planned solely to secure the greatest food value for the least money? There being no "economic woman," no family will ever be fed that way, but do not our food cost figures, when applied to wages, assume that that is the way the Slavic laborer lives?

These are only queries but they seem to indicate the need of more study before we can gauge what is really extravagance in food expenditure, whether what is reckoned extravagance does not indicate that a housekeeper's common sense provides a more scientific method of feeding than that proposed in laboratory-made diets.

We also need to set a standard as to the degree of wastefulness or of skill in the purchase and preparation of food that we consider normal. Theoretically, a certain amount of money will purchase a certain amount of nourishment. As a matter of fact this depends, of course, on the skill of the housewife, which varies from that of the graduate of a course in domestic science to that of the most ignorant frier of thin steak and buyer of pies and pickles. What grade of domestic skill are we assuming in estimating our family budgets? Two interesting accounts which I have compared in my book on Homestead show the difference in cost per unit of food value between the purchases of a poor colored woman who went out to clean by the day, and those of the daughter of a Pennsylvania farmer whose total family income was much larger. But is it not really illogical to base our standards on what an intelligent woman can buy food for? We know that it is the rare day laborer who has so capable a wife. In calculating the minimum cost of living we must recognize the inevitable ignorance and wastefulness on the part of poor women, at least until our schools give a kind of domestic training that really teaches housekeeping.

Of course, this is an item in the cost of living which can and unquestionably should be reduced. In discussing wages in terms of living conditions, however, must we not use a standard that in a measure applies to conditions as we find them, not to the ideal state? Professor Chittenden in working out his figures eliminated from his calculations this item of waste as incalculable and assumed that the family secured all the nourishment there was in the food purchased.

Another question of growing importance is the inevitable increase in expenditures if the mother goes out to work. When her wages constitute or are included in the family income, what extra allowance should be made to compensate for the waste entailed by her absence,

the greater expense for food bought ready cooked and for ready made clothing? This whole question is an interesting one; the relative sufficiency of a given income when contributed by the father alone and when it is a composite income contributed by several members of the family. In the recent study of the conditions under which children leave school, made by the department of labor, it is judged that if the family have a per capita income of \$1.50 or \$2 a week in addition to rent, there is no economic necessity for having the children leave school. So far as I could discover, no distinction was made between a family of young children with a father earning a good wage and a group of older children supporting the same sized family on the same total income. (Of course, this per capita was calculated from what the children turned in to the common purse and not their whole wages.) The budget studies of cotton mill families, also published by the department of labor, show most clearly however, how a fairly high composite income means in toto often a low standard. The mill-owned houses only have four rooms so the higher income which means more adults in the family often means greater overcrowding. There is a high clothing expense for the daughter who goes out to work as compared with the mother who stays at home to work; in one case \$119 for the daughter as compared with \$1.98 for the mother. Not only in food but far more in rent, clothing, amusements and sundries, the expenditures are markedly influenced by the age of the various members of the family. These extra expenditures for clothing and amusements for the young women, for a larger home where some entertaining of friends becomes possible certainly must be reckoned part of the normal standard.

Finally, I am brought to another point where it seems to me that further investigation is needed. Has anyone the faintest idea what a minimum sane expenditure for sundries would be? Yet, in this item we include all the subtle expenditures that go so far toward making life wholesome; expenditures for schools and newspapers, for church, for amusements. I studied in detail the sundries in a few of my Homestead families and they ran from carfare to candy, from stove blacking to seed for the canary bird. It is, of course, almost impossible to analyze all these detailed expenses and construct from them even an estimate, but we need a far clearer picture than we now have of the way in which such expenditures affect the physical well-being of a family. Their very vagueness has

made all of us, no matter how carefully we have worked out the rest of our standard, stop when we get to sundries and just guess, setting down perhaps a figure that brings our total estimate to a round figure like \$15 a week or \$1,000 a year. It is certainly the best that we can do now; and, yet, around that item cluster some interesting and debatable questions. How much recreation is a physical necessity and how much does it cost to get it? If a day laborer is to vote is not a newspaper a necessary item in his budget? How are the churches which working people attend to be supported? What is the result of lack of physical care in towns that have no dispensaries, where the doctor is a luxury to be consulted only in dire need? Should we agitate against midwives when a laborer's wife cannot afford the regular doctor's fee? How much insurance should be provided for sickness and death? What should be the difference in expenditure for sundries between families living in a city that has free school books, a public library, playgrounds, social centers in the public schools, dispensaries and dental clinics, and one that makes no such provision? In my Homestead accounts, I found that whereas the families with an income of less than \$12 a week spent 50 cents a week for sundries, the families with an income of more than \$20 spent \$4.09 for sundries, more than eight times as much. My personal knowledge of these families made me believe that this increase was wholesome and in the long run tended to create physical well-being and more intelligent citizenship.

As a last point what is the effect of undue economy on all lives, what does the everlasting grind do to the woman's body and to her temper? A woman who had on \$2.25 a day attained a pleasant little home, attractive dresses for her daughters, some flowers in her window, told me little by little the story of what they had cost her of absolute self-denial, of long hours of work, of rigid economy, at the price of a lost temper and broken health. Certainly we must not seek to justify waste and extravagance. But let us make a more critical study of the physiological and psychological effects of certain limitations of expenditure, that we may know which items are necessary to physical efficiency and which can be entirely eliminated from our minimum wage scale. The human body is not a machine to be fed and tended as a machine and we must know the conditions under which it can be kept at a high level of physical efficiency.